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ABSTRACT

To help public schools improve their relations with the community, the author offers specific suggestions regarding six areas of communication. In the first area, communication with the general public, he advocates open communication, encouragement of all types of questions, and accountability to the public. Next he points out the potentially positive and negative effects of citizen advisory groups. Inhouse communications, according to the author, can also be used to encourage employees to communicate positive aspects of the schools. In the area of media communication, he recommends establishing good rapport with newspersons and having one person in each school handle all media contacts. Parent participation is identified as another area of communication that needs to be pursued more effectively. Finally, he recommends that school facilities be made accessible to the community whenever the school is not using them and suggests several rules to help avoid misuse or confusion. (Author/RW)

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PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

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School and community relationships represent an important concern for public school practitioners at all levels in today's society. With schools being closely monitered, it behooves the education process to have support from as many areas as possible. What the public schools must remember is that the quality of the educational program that they will be able to offer depends upon the financial and supportive attitudes of their community. Thus, a consciencious program which brings about positive relations is not only sagacious, but is easily justified ethically and financially. This article will present several pertinent and practical recommendations to improve public school and community relationships. Some of these recommendations will be a review, others will be new.

OPEN COMMUNICATION WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC

An important aspect of obtaining and maintaining positive relations between school and community is to keep open the line of communication. Specific ways to do this vary, according to the situation, but include:

1. Making your school programs clear to the public by speaking about them in understandable (lay) language.
2. Being accessable and encouraging all questions no matter how sensitive.
3. Development and positive use of a school advisory council for every school within the district and an overall council for the district.
4. Making certain all of the administration and school staff are aware of central office philosophy regarding community relations. This can be done by holding in-service workshops as often as necessary on this subject, and by verbal and

written communication.
5. Keeping the school administrators accountable and highly visible to the public.

CITIZEN ADVISORY GROUPS

Citizen advisory groups can also be a force for improving communication between schools and community. Although these groups can bring about positive results, it is wise to remember that the potential is always present for misuse. When advisory groups are in a formation stage they should be made up of at least a few individuals who have a broad base, and who are responsible and objective. If the group is an on-going one, this step should be put in as soon as feasible. Reasonable and objective individuals will be more likely to be able to influence citizen advisory groups and lead them to be being open minded.

Advisory groups can not be dominated by an adminstrator, but some sort of a balance of power between school personnel and lay people must be maintained. In a non-threatening way, an administrator might be able to point out a flaw in a pending recommendation that a group of citizens might not be aware of. An example would be a recommendation to the board of education which is illegal because of conflict with federal legislation. Potential hard feelings and negative vibrations could be avoided between the council members and the board by judicious advice of an administrator, well before

the specific recommendation was able to reach a public forum.

Problems can develop when citizen advisory groups are used. However, their potential for benefit usually outweighs their potential for harm. They remain a very acceptable way to get the concerned community individuals, both pro and con public education, actively involved in a positive manner.

IN-HOUSE COMMUNICATION

As previously alluded, public school administrators should keep developments above board and open as much as they professionally and ethically can.

Negative school aspects should be neither hidden, denied, nor played up for emphasis. It is assumed that bad news is interesting and travels fast. Therefore, it need not be over publicized.

All school employees should be encouraged to communicate positive aspects of their schools. This may necessitate filling them in on developments through the use of faculty meetings, informal comments, and an in-house newsletter. Not only should the professional employees be encouraged to be positive, but so should all non-professionals. Bus drivers, cleaners, custodians, secretaries and aides have enormus potential to spread news about the schools to the community.

Positive reflection would help all of the previously mentioned

groups, plus the students, develop a sense of pride in their schools. When the beneficial aspects of the school are effectively pointed out, public education will be more likely discussed in a favorable manner within the community.

MEDIA COMMUNICATION

Active cooperation with the media is also an important aspect of maintaining and developing public relations for the school administrator. He should be familiar with all reporters who cover their local school district and be accessable and accomondating. Instead of waiting to be contacted, interesting information should be submitted on a regular basis. If a good rapport is established, an administrator will often be able to get across a proper interpretation of his or the school district's viewpoint.

From a personal viewpoint, whenever possible I have found it useful to have all of the school buildings to release school prepared and distributed statements to the newspapers. This helps cut down, but certainly does not eliminate, misquotes and misconceptions.

It also is useful to have all media contacts funneled through a single individual. This person is often, but not necessarialy, the building principal. By funneling school information released to the media through one person, contradictions, negative personal comments, duplication, and poor image builders such as simple grammar mistakes

may often be avoided. It should be noted that handling all information for the media by a single person can not always be done. Athletics, for example, would be one area in which it would be impossible. Even though it is sometimes difficult, funneling information released to the media can often avoid incorrect communication and resulting community perception.

Whether you use one individual or several, media communication should always be handled with sensitivity according to the need of the individual situation.

PARENT PARTICIPATION

Parent participation is also a well known way to build better relationships and to try to improve the schools' educational efforts. Parents should be actively encouraged to become involved with local schools. The school, and not the parent, should be held responsible to initiate contact and subsequent involvement. Often lip service is paid to this responsibility and it is not effectively pursued. Not all parents can be involved, but there is tremendous room for improvement with parent participation.

The first contact between school and a parent should be of a non-threatening, complimentary nature. When this is successfully done and repeated, mutually benefical relationships are likely to develop. Another benefit of positive home contact is a higher

probability of home reinforcement and support if contact of a negative nature is necessary in the future.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

School facilities ought to be accessible to the community whenever they are not being used for school purposes. To help avoid confusion, definite rules such as a non-discriminatory, first-come, first-serve policy should be made clear.

As a preventative measure, requiring the presence of a representative of the school at all events not only makes for common sense, but can cut short misuse before it gets a chance to happen.

Other regulations that will facilitate operations include insurance obligations, financial reimbursement policy, clean up responsibilites, and individual school controls. However, the administrator should take care to not make these rules too restrictive, thereby defeating the original good will efforts.

CONCLUSION

Community understanding and support are essential to the success of all phases of the public school program. Before any aspect of a school's public relations program is instituted, the individual environment ought to be evalulated to see what is likely to be effective.

Choices and emphasis for building a better communication networks with the community can be made from the areas of public communication, citizen advisory groups, in-house communication, media communication, parent participation, and making school facilities accessible to the public. The potential and advantages of community support as a rich resource for public education can not be underestimated.

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